

Why our old Roads are in bad shape ...and what to do about them.

A number of roads in Amherst, about 23 miles worth, are in need of reconstruction. They are almost all old roads that were not built to take the weight and volume of today's traffic.

Before the advent of the automobile, and for sometime after it appeared on the scene, all the roads in Amherst were dirt roads. They were built of whatever material existed on site. In the higher elevations, it was gravel. In some of the lower areas, where the roads passed by swamps and bogs, the road material was a bit more organic. It was a common practice to lay logs across the roads to keep the wagons from sinking into the mud, particularly in the spring. That is how Corduroy Road got its name, but many roads in town were built the same way (it must have been a bone-jarring ride). In the winter, the snow was rolled, or packed down, and people switched from horse-drawn wagons to sleds.

By the 1930s and 1940s, when it became apparent that the automobile was not quite as intrepid as a horse-drawn wagon in the mud (and could not compete with a sled), we began to pave our roads. In those days, automobiles were a bit lighter than they are today, and trucks were much smaller and lighter. Traffic in this farming community was nearly all local, and Boston Post Road, for instance, was probably used by as many as fifty or one hundred cars per day. We don't know for certain, because there were no traffic counters in those days.

The town's road agent did what was perfectly proper for the times – he smoothed out the dirt road and applied a couple of inches of asphalt. That treatment served the people of the town well for a number of years. Amherst was, after all, a small, town with only a couple of thousand people, and most traffic was, indeed, local. If someone had predicted that Boston Post Road would someday carry 7000 trips per day, he would have been laughed out of town.

Fast forward to 2010. The town has experienced a great deal of growth since about 1970. Today, most people in town commute to other places for work, and the towns around us have grown, and more people drive through Amherst to and from work. Boston Post Road is used by 7000 vehicles per day. The volume of today's traffic, coupled with additional weight, has taken its toll on those old roads, which were never built to handle it.

Over the years, we have applied stopgap measures in an attempt to stem the deterioration of the old roads, but simply paving over roads that were not constructed for today's traffic proves to be futile. A year or so after paving, cracks reappear through the new layer of asphalt. Today's cars and trucks continue to beat away at the inadequate pavement, and water continues to seep through the cracks into the base, causing more frost heaves in the winter, which makes the cracking of the road even worse, and so it goes. The problems are most apparent in the low-lying areas, where the road base, instead of being gravel, is made of organic material you'd be happy to use in your garden, plus logs. Just putting a layer of asphalt on such a road is analogous to painting rotten wood siding – the paint will soon crack and blister, it will no longer do its job, and the siding will continue to rot, only faster.

The only solution is to reconstruct those roads so that they can handle today's traffic. Doing less is neither prudent nor economical.

Please vote yes on March 9 on Warrant Article #22 which will approve the \$15 million bonding authority needed to do the reconstruction of the nearly 23 miles of bad roads. A 60% majority is needed for this article to pass.

Bill Overholt
Chairman Road Commission